

Education, Language, and Identity Amongst Students at a South African University

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This article reports on a study of language and cultural identity of mother-tongue Zulu students at an English-medium South African university. The data consist of focus group interviews, questionnaires, and student opinions in essays. Findings include a strong identification of the participants with the Zulu language and Zulu culture, and a view of English variously as a language of settlers that participants are forced to speak for instrumental reasons, or, more positively, as a language useful for education and as a lingua franca. Stigmatisation of those who speak English “too much” was evident. Other findings are that although participants had been educated at nominally English-medium schools, classroom instruction for many was likely to have been in Zulu, with English used only for written work. After 1 year at university, however, students could articulate a clear idea of the kind of writing demanded by university study.

Key words: post-apartheid South Africa, cultural identity, Zulu language

Tertiary education requires accommodation to the values and the literacy practices of the university, which inevitably impacts students’ sense of identity. Rural L2 students are likely to have attended poorly resourced secondary schools, which neglect university-related literacy practices. They thus have greater accommodation to make than do those South African students who have attended well-resourced schools and who are able to study in their mother tongue. Thus the university sees many L2 speakers as lacking in the academic literacy necessary for university study.

This article examines the influence of schooling, language, and literacy on identity construction in South African students who are mother-tongue speakers of Zulu and who live in KwaZulu-Natal. It examines experiences of (dis)continuity between under-resourced rural schooling and tertiary study in a multicultural city environment. Because the participants have, for equity reasons, been admitted to university despite not meeting entry criteria, they are enrolled in an “alternative access” degree program. We explore the effect of this positioning by the institution on participants’ sense of identity.

THE NOTION OF IDENTITIES

Identity has come to be viewed as socially constructed, something we “do” rather than something we “are” (Ivanic, 1998). We “do” different identities in different contexts and, therefore, have multiple rather than single identities. For Ochs (1993) identity is “a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships and institutional and other relevant community identities that one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life” (p. 288). Identity is constituted in discourse and Weedon (1987) suggests that our “conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions” and our sense of ourselves is “constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (p. 32). Individuals negotiate identity with others. It is not enough that we view ourselves as embodying a certain identity; others must recognise this identity as well. Similarly, we can take up or resist the identity we are assigned.

BACKGROUND: LITERACY AND LANGUAGE USE IN SOUTH AFRICA

In this section we provide the background to language use and literacy acquisition in South Africa. Key in this discussion is the dominance of English in education and other fields and the resultant use of English as a medium of instruction in most schools. We adopt the concept of literacy used by the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1993), regarding literacy as more complex than being able to read and write. Instead, literacy is viewed as multiple—not only literacy in different languages, but also literacy for different purposes (e.g., religious services, casual conversation, academic lectures, etc.). Language users are viewed as becoming familiar with a range of literacy practises (e.g., the genres prominent in a discipline) or being able to shift register (e.g., from a conversational to a formal register, or vernacular to standard variety). Acquiring a literacy involves sharing the values of the language community and taking on a role recognised by other members of the community. This has implications for identity: for example, what is the writer of a lab report being?

Language Ideology in South Africa

South Africa has 45 million people, 21% in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) (Statistics South Africa, 2001). Of 9.4 million in KZN, 85% are African, 8% Indian, and 5% White. As can be seen from Table 1, Zulu is the mother tongue of the largest proportion of the population, while mother-tongue English speakers are the sixth most numerous. In KZN however, almost all of the Black

TABLE 1
Home Language in KZN and South Africa as a Whole

<i>Languages</i>	<i>Zulu</i>	<i>Xhosa</i>	<i>Afrikaans</i>	<i>Pedi</i>	<i>Tswana</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Sotho</i>	<i>Other</i>
KZN	80.9%	2.3%	1.5%	0.1%	0.1%	13.6%	0.7%	0.8%
SA	23.8%	17.6%	13.3%	9.4%	8.2%	8.2%	7.9%	11.6%

Note. Source: Statistics South Africa, 2001, p. 16.

African population are mother-tongue speakers of Zulu, while English is spoken by almost all of the White and Indian population.

As Gough (1996), and others have noted, English, mother tongue to only 8.2% of South Africans (Statistics South Africa, 2001), is the most influential of the nominally equal 11 South African languages. A positive attitude to English stems from apartheid days when English was preferred as the medium of instruction over Afrikaans, rejected as a language of oppression; the option of mother-tongue instruction in African languages was viewed as divide and rule tactics by the apartheid government (Barkhuizen & Gough, 1996). Influence and use of English has grown in the post-apartheid era.

Language and Literacy at South African Schools

Probyn et al. (2002) found that despite the introduction in 1997 of a progressive Language in Education Policy advocating maintenance of the learners' home language, schools with African language-learners choose to study in English after the first three years. Lockett (1995) points out that this happens before good grounding in mother-tongue literacy has happened, benefiting literacy in neither language.

Despite 15 years of upgrading of schooling for African learners, education in English, by teachers who may not be adequately proficient in English, is still the norm. Education is nominally an English medium, and all reading and writing is in English; but in effect the mother tongue of learners and teachers dominates in the classroom, resulting in little reading and writing. Perhaps because of learners' low English proficiency, Pile and Smythe (1999) found that teachers fail to use textbooks, so learners have restricted models for writing. Learners' homes are largely oral and there is little publishing in African languages (Niven, 2005), so literacy in any language suffers.

Racial Identity and (Dis)advantage in South Africa

Belief in South Africa in four distinct races (Coloured, Black, Indian, and White) is ongoing (McKinney, 2007; Vincent, 2008) and is reinforced officially for reasons of redress. As McKinney (2007) points out, reinforcing racist labels is problematic, as these four groups are far from homogeneous in terms of class and social opportunities. In the last 20 years, a growing proportion of South Africans have had access to the advantaged education reserved for White children under apartheid. Such schools are staffed by well-qualified and usually mother-tongue speakers of the language of instruction.

Vincent's (2008) study on a South African university campus found greater racial contact and tolerance than during apartheid but not significantly more integration between groups. Vincent found "White" to be the "ordinary" category; Black students must make more adjustment to the university environment than White contemporaries, may subconsciously participate in a view of themselves as lacking, and feel unexpressed resentments. Vincent also found that students of all races police integration by stigmatising individuals who form friendships with other groups. Particularly stigmatized are Black students who attended previously White schools. Such students are viewed as "not real Blacks" by Black peers and, in some cases, by White friends. De Kadt's (2005) study, which took place at the same university as the study presented here, reports

pressure from fellow students on Zulu speakers to speak Zulu, a finding echoed in the present study.

Language Education and Identity in South Africa

Archer (2008) describes South African engineering students taking on a new identity as engineers while retaining an identity as a member of a rural community. Her study suggests that there are benefits for students who can avoid a sense of discontinuity between their different identities. Bangeni and Kapp (2007) traced the language attitudes of students with African languages as their home language; some had attended relatively advantaged schools while, like the students in our study, others had attended rural or township schools. They found that although students initially equated English with "Whiteness," they later came to demonstrate a shared affiliation for English and their home language.

Both Kapp (2004) and Rudwick (2004) document studies concerning adolescents at less advantaged schools. While very aware of the instrumental value of proficiency in English in education, participants in these 2 studies resented the growing power of English and emphasized the need to speak their mother tongue to avoid "forget[ting] about our culture" (Rudwick, 2004, p.167). Those who attend advantaged schools acquire the White South African English variety and risk being characterised as having lost their culture. This attitude is echoed by participants in our study.

From a contrasting perspective, McKinney's (2007) study at racially mixed schools in Johannesburg reflects the complexity of statuses attached to the use of, on the one hand, an African language, and on the other hand, English, including different varieties of English ("White" English and "Black" English). While valuing the more prestigious "White" English their educational experiences had given them, participants reported experiencing stigmatisation as inauthentic Africans who spoke too much English.

In De Kadt and Mathonsi's (2003) study of academic literacy acquisition by speakers of African languages, students felt that the monolingual nature of their English-medium university suppressed their ability to express an identity as an African. Such an identity would, they felt, involve speaking/writing in an African language and expressing the realities of life for those African people who live in poverty. Students felt they had to compromise and "write in a language that is not yours" (p. 97). This sense of alienation from English is echoed in the opinions expressed by our participants.

METHODOLOGY

The Context of the Study

The authors of this study are White English speakers who are unable to speak Zulu. Social factors such as the class and race of the researchers are pertinent to this study, and we were aware that our presence might influence the data. To facilitate students' expressing themselves freely, most of the focus group interviews were conducted by a young, approachable Zulu-speaking colleague (Interviewer 1) known to students in her role as student counsellor.

The authors were teachers of a writing course taken by the participants, which focuses on genres prominent in the students' disciplines as well as acquisition of a formal register. Such courses provide a link for students between a schooling system that did not address their literacy needs and degree studies designed with educationally more advantaged L1 entrants in mind. As a result, educationally less advantaged entrants need an "alternative" admissions year, with additional content classes to help them with "normal" courses. In this context, mother-tongue proficiency in English is "normal," as is a school education at a "good" school. Participants in this study, who were both educationally disadvantaged and L2 speakers of English, were, by contrast with the expectations of those with an L1 advantaged education, doubly deficient.

The Participants

Forty-eight Black African science students participated in this study. Of these, 43 (90%) identified their mother tongue as Zulu. Others identified Swati, Xhosa, or Sotho. They attend an English-medium university in the KwaZulu-Natal province at which, in 2008, the student population was reported to be 54% African, 31% Indian, and 12% White (Division of Management Information UKZN, 2008). Most participants live in on-campus accommodation. Shortage of such accommodation means priority is given to rural students, largely Zulu-speakers, decreasing the opportunity to interact with English speakers. As we will show later, there is peer pressure on participants to speak Zulu rather than English in residence and on campus in general.

The Data

Data collected included focus group interviews, a questionnaire on home and school literacy experiences, and student writing. Students were interviewed at the end of their first year. Students were invited to speak any language they felt comfortable speaking. The interviews were transcribed and interactions in Zulu and Sotho were translated. Student writing, including an essay written on varieties of English in South Africa, was collected during the year in which they were enrolled in the academic literacy course. The questionnaire attempted to probe where and when they attended school, their experience of classroom literacy practices, and experiences of reading, writing, and so forth.

ISSUES OF IDENTITY

Cultural Identity

During the course of the study, it became clear that cultural identity was important to the participants; culture as a concept was raised repeatedly by participants during interviews. Participants' understanding of the concept included beliefs (including religious beliefs), attitudes, values, practices, and social relations.

Participants in the study identified themselves in two main ways: as Zulus with strong links to Zulu culture through a rural home and as being on the path to education and a well-paid job. Participant identification was with being Zulu rather than, more broadly, Africans. Zulu cultural practices are important, including appeasing ancestors, which results in protection from them.

Significantly, identification as a Zulu also involves speaking, thinking, and even dreaming in the Zulu language (“In all of my dreams I speak isiZulu. I will never ever dream in English” [excerpt 1]).

Participants insisted that it is impossible to change one’s culture. The length of some of the turns in the following extract and weighty themes such as “killing our Nation” suggests fear of losing links to culture. This loss was expressed by students who had attended advantaged schools in De Kadt (2005). Cultural change is likely, given the rate of social change and large scale urbanisation in South Africa; this may make participants cling to the idea that cultural values and behaviours are enduring. In excerpts 1 and 2, in their reference to ancestors, students 1 and 2 characterise culture as having endured for a long time and likely to continue. Student 6 suggests that change is possible but only to “add to our culture” rather than replace it. Student 2 suggests that people can change their culture “if it works for you,” but that even if you make surface changes, “you are still going to go back home.”

Interview excerpt 1:

- S6:** We want to have nice houses .. all sorts of good things .. but that doesn’t mean we need to change our culture . . . We will take other peoples’ culture .. and where will our culture go? .. So that means that we are killing our Nation.
- S9:** I think that there is one thing that can change it’s your identity but the culture cannot change . . . Culture is who you are and where you come from but with identity the environment is the number one thing . . . Identity can change because it is linked to where you are now and the environment that can change your identity.
- S10:** Trying to change your culture but you can’t . . . It is something belonging to your forefathers even your ancestors .. they are here for you .. they are protecting you wherever you go.
- S1:** I can say if you believe in ancestors .. we used to slaughter a goat . . . If you are at university .. it doesn’t mean that you don’t have to do that . . . You still have to do that . . . But changing identity doesn’t mean that don’t have to do things that our forefathers have done.

Interview excerpt 2:

- S2:** If it works for you .. you can change your culture .. like at home you appease the ancestors .. and here you change to praying . . . Until you have your degree you will know by then what works for you . . . but you are still going to go back home.
- S1:** It’s not that you change that you are a Zulu or you are from rural areas .. but you are not behaving the same as before. It’s not something that you plan; it’s something that happened; you’ll see that there are things that I do that I didn’t know while I was doing them; .. actually you are expanding; your life goes to another level; it’s not as if you change what you are: what you are won’t change actually
- S10:** You become a new person because here at varsity it’s like part of growing it’s like you are on your own; at home you were guided by parents. Here nobody guides you—you are your parent
- S4:** When you get to university it’s not the same as at home people here are very different .. different backgrounds .. so you get to know a lot of people .. so when you get back home it’s like something has changed.

Student 1 (excerpt 1) contrasts identity with culture, suggesting it is unchanging, while “your identity can change.” Culture, in this view, can perhaps be conceptualised as beliefs, values, and practises passed down from forefathers, constructing a cultural identity that students felt they participated in and shared with others. What Student 1 calls identity, by contrast, appears to be more personal and more able to change, an identity dependent on the environment a person is in: home and “varsity.” Most students report experiencing “identity” as something that can change with education and the experience of being in a new environment. This change is mentioned positively in terms of growth, expansion and “going to a new level” (excerpt 2). We refer to this identity as an *educated/university* identity.

The sense of having changed as a result of experiences at university can be quite profound, resulting in a different perspective on life and the feeling that it is home rather than self that has changed. Student 4’s contribution reflects this.

Parents were presented by participants as an important source of cultural knowledge and guidance. Repeatedly in the data, participants say that their parents are there to guide them. Some participants claimed they would “only do what (their parents) thought” for them, while others resist the obligation to follow career paths mapped out by parents. There is a sense of a group rooted in traditional cultural values, while at the same time moving into a rapidly changing urban environment. A number expressed ambitions of giving their children a more advantaged life than their own.

Education and Community Demands Versus Self-Realisation

The importance of connection to home is reflected in responsibility to the community and those in the participants’ rural home. This may come from the post-apartheid struggle and discourse of equality (see below Student 11’s strictures against making “ourselves look bigger than other people”) and democracy; or it may be grounded in the African cultural value for community rather than individualism. For example, Steve Biko (1978) characterised community action as drawing on an African tradition of “community-oriented action rather than individualism” (p. 42). Schutte (1993), too, notes the “interdependence of persons on others . . . in African traditional thought” (p. 46). William Makgoba (1997) maintains that features of African culture include “*ubuntu*¹ and the emphasis on community rather than on the individual” (p. 197). Responsibility to the community is important to participants, who stressed the necessity for educated people, with their increased earning power, to help the community.

Interview excerpt 3:

S 7: If you look to people.. those who are educated they seem.. they most distance themselves from those people who are not educated.. like most of them.. who are educated.. they leave their place where they was grow up.. to live in expensive places.. after their education. .. It is not good enough.. because if you are educated you have to change lives of people.. of those people.. where you come from. Ja.

¹*Ubuntu*: humanity towards others, or as one participant explained it, doing things in such a way that you obey your human dignity.

- S 4: I think there are some reasons why educated people behave this way. Just because they .. people they live with .. maybe they discriminate him or her because you have everything and they have nothing.
- S 3: Once we become educated it's not easy to go back to the rural areas to satisfy your dream because you have got too much crimes and chaos and although you have got the money .. it's not easy to live there because of the lack of development.
- S 1: At university that is where I am alone I'm without parents so I just find what I want and who I am 'cos when I'm at home the parents want to judge you: "you have to do teaching teaching ya ya ya we need a teacher here yes or a nurse" so when I am at university I know what I want and so especially South Africa if you are not educated er you cannot live in this world now I don't mean you going to die but I mean the lifestyle suits the educated people now so it will expand you
- S 5: I suppose having a degree is one of the way of finding who I am **what I can do with my dreams** .. finding a sense of who I am

In excerpt 3, some students focus on the expectation that education will allow access to a good job and money. For students 7 and 10, there is a responsibility for the educated to return and benefit those back home. Yet for most, this means a move from the rural area to an area with "a high standard of living"; underdevelopment and crime are cited as reasons. This sets up a tension between community expectations and the individual's desire for a comfortable city lifestyle. In Student 4's pause between "they" and "people they live with" there is a sense that she sees the rural community at home, "they," as a group to which she no longer wholly belongs. This impression that Student 4 has begun to identify herself as part of the educated wealthy group is strengthened in "*you* have everything and *they* have nothing" (our emphasis). Similarly Student 3 says "although *you* have got money."

In excerpt 3, there is also the impression from Student 1 that community expectations to become a teacher or nurse and then return to the community are a burden, and one she might choose not to fulfil. Being alone at university has given her the freedom, as she says, to "find out what I want and who I am." A number of students mentioned "fulfilling their dreams," but Student 1's comment and that of Student 5, "finding a sense of who I am," went furthest toward an individualistic Western notion of self-actualisation through education.

Being "Educationally Disadvantaged"

In excerpt 4, Student 10 outlines the kind of school that is commonly found in the rural and township² areas of South Africa. Her school was one with underqualified teachers (only "some" of her teachers had done matric, the final high school year). Classrooms were overcrowded (70 in her class), laboratories and libraries might be present but are likely not to be used, water and electricity might be missing, and the building might be run down, with broken windows, holes in

²Townships are suburban areas that during apartheid were set aside for Black Africans. They are characterised by high density and small houses.

the roof, and such. In this context, it is surprising how well a number of students had achieved in their school-leaving examinations.

Interview excerpt 4:

S 10: Disadvantaged school are very poor schools like my school um they are schools that most schools in rural areas they don't have teachers like mine didn't have teachers um ok but I do have some that were that have matric from our school and we didn't have water .. laboratories .. er libraries .. of course there was a library but learners were not allowed to use it only for teachers and ya ok we do have shelter but it was .. like grade 12 like we've got only two grade 12 like in a class you found about 70 learners so we didn't broken windows so life was complicated so that's a disadvantaged school

Interview excerpt 5:

Interviewer 1: OK Let me ask you this thing . . . Everyone knows that CSA³ only takes students from disadvantaged school . . . Carrying that label with you from a disadvantaged school . . . Does it impact on how people see you?

S 8: What I think is that .. we are very lucky to be here . . . You can find that somebody passed very well .. and the most that did very well are coming from disadvantaged schools. . .

S 2: **I don't tell myself that I am coming from those disadvantaged rural schools . . . If I am here I know that I am doing my work .. that's it . . . Even if a person asks me about the course I am doing .. I tell him/her that I am doing the Foundation here .. Then he/she starts looking down upon me as if like I am at a very low standard . . . But that is none of my concern .. because he can say it .. he can not say it .. to me it's the same thing . . . Because I know why I am here and I will succeed.**

Interviewer 1: So the label doesn't bother you? It doesn't? And does it shape how others see you?

S 5: **It is hard to enrol at a tertiary institution. You receive lots of regrets before they accept you. As long .. be proud that you managed to enrol at the University and not mind other people's opinion of you as long as you know what you are here for.**

Interviewer 1: OK. Would you be shy to tell somebody that you are doing Foundation?

Students: No .. No

Interviewer 1: Who is shy to tell somebody? Ay I'm not convinced.

S 7: Sometimes. .. Like when you talk to a chick (laughter) she ask you **brother** what do you do? You won't say Augmented (laughter)

³CSA: the "Centre for Science Access"—the alternative access programme set up to promote equity, entry to which is limited to students who do not meet entry requirements and who attended educationally disadvantaged schools. This is referred to variously by students as "here," "Foundation," and "Augmented."

Interview excerpt 6:

Interviewer 1: Right guys.. in Access they only take students from a disadvantaged school .. So what are your views about that?

S 3: First there was something I didn't like when I came here during orientation . . . this other guy who came there and he said er people from disadvantaged school came here and said "they want to do a course called the test tubes" . . . like the way he said it like .. It's not as if we don't know anything it's like they make us to be like inferior .. it's like they are discriminating us and the other thing when they show the video they show 5-year boys .. like it was rural areas .. they were even dirty . . . that's why they just shame

In excerpt 5, students deny shame at having entered the university through the alternative route for educationally disadvantaged students who did not meet normal entry requirements. Student 8 (excerpt 5) claims that students in this programme are more likely to graduate, and that other students envy this opportunity. Given the poor educational background of participants, many, such as Student 5 ("be proud **that you managed to enrol at the University**"), expressed pride in being at university at all. Students resist the identity of "disadvantaged student" and instead construct themselves as "lucky to be here."

There is, however, an implication that students experience others looking down on them (excerpt 5). Student 2 claims to be open about being a student in the programme but "then he/she starts looking down upon me as if I am at a very low standard." Student 5 tells others not to "mind other people's opinion" implying a sense of superiority by "other people."

Interviewer 1 (a student counsellor, with insight into how the "disadvantaged" status is regarded by students) insists that she is "not convinced" by students' denial of embarrassment of the label. Student 7, with hesitation and laughter, then admits that when speaking to members of the opposite sex in a social context, he does feel embarrassed by this status and thus omits to mention it (excerpt 5).

The statement by Student 3 (excerpt 6) makes it clear, too, that participants are sensitive to a view of students from disadvantaged schools as ignorant or inferior. They vigorously reject this view as shameful discrimination. Thus, although most participants were surprisingly accepting of the "disadvantaged school" label, they objected to the association of this with ignorance, inferiority, or dirt. This is an example of participants resisting an assigned identity and asserting an alternative one.

Language and Literacy at School

How do students experience the change in learning context from a rural school to the university? Students move from schools in which reading and writing are undervalued to the university, where there is heavy emphasis on written and spoken English.

What do students report about their literate history and the literacy demands of the university? Students reported having little experience of English at school. Questionnaire responses show that for fewer than 40% of participants English was the language usually used by their teachers at high school. Questionnaire responses indicate that use of English at school was largely written. This makes expression in English at university difficult, especially initially.

Questionnaire responses show that students' main experience of reading at school was textbooks. One-third of the group mentioned that they had had, in addition, access to newspapers and magazines. Nevertheless, by the end of first year, students had a good sense of the written literacy expected by lecturing staff at university. In excerpts 7 and 8, students agreed that their school understanding of good writing included the use of "bombastic," "high class" words (long, difficult, literary words). Now they say language should be "simple," not "bombastic." The insight into the requirements of focused written literacy in the extract that follows is striking. Students say writing should show understanding of the question, provide an answer specific to the question, focus on main points, be organised and clear. To be regarded as valid, facts must draw on other referenced sources, and integrate ideas from different sources. Students say reading beyond the course is rewarded, as "the lecturer doesn't give you enough information." Surprisingly, being penalised for grammatical errors was not mentioned, implying tolerance from lecturers for nonstandard written English.

Interview excerpt 7:

- S 1: When the teacher was teaching they see that none of us were understanding .. so they just use Zulu.
- S 2: Now everything you write is in English. You have to think in Zulu and then you try to say it in English. You don't think in English.
- S 6: I would write a long thing to explain something in Zulu, but in English I am not able to .. no words to explain.

Interview excerpt 8:

Interviewer 1: What do you need to do in your writing if you want to get good marks?

- S 1: In varsity like when the lecturer is teaching like he doesn't give you enough information so what I'm saying is that if you are not working hard you won't get good marks so you just have to go for yourself and find information for yourself it must be like they have to see when you are writing that you have gone abroad and find stuff from the library not the only one they have given you so if you can do that is where you can get marks 'cos if you are using what they have given you .. you just get few marks.
- S 3: I think in order for you to pass you have to be specific about your writing .. for example I can know a lot of information about the question being asked **but the problem is that I can not be specific . . . What you need to do is that .. just write simple English so that it can be understandable and the English that will explain exactly what you want to say.**
- S 9: They are marking the main points so you must provide a clear explanation to give direction to what you are thinking about this.
- S 5: I think in terms of er in English in essay they want us to be able to use er different information from different articles and put it together and what we must do there we have to use the facts that are valid not write whatever you like to write and again your work must be organized a person who read your work must be able to understand what you have written in order to get a good marks and your English must be simple it doesn't matter whether if its is bombastic but if the sequencing is not good you cannot get a good marks

Attitudes to English and Zulu

In the following excerpt, English is construed in two ways, both instrumental. Firstly, it is seen as the language of foreigners, a language forced on students, in which the student does not dream or understand jokes. More positively, it is a lingua franca that enables communication between mother-tongue speakers of different African languages.

Interview excerpt 9:

Interviewer 1: Does any group own English in SA?

- S11:** Ya. . . . English is not my language . . . English belongs to those people who are speaking it .. people who are coming from England and moved here to South Africa. I speak English because I am forced to speak it.. I am forced. .. So it belongs to them. .. Because even if I speak it.. I do not speak it in such a way that I own it . . . You see.. if I speak isiZulu you can hear that I own it. .. I.. no one can tell me anything about isiZulu because it is mine and I own it
- S6:** It belongs to everybody. .. Because actually it's like the Zulus.. I am Sotho speaking ne.⁴ If we meet each other it's like I actually use English to communicate with them. It's like for everybody .. it's a medium of instruction
- S4:** If I am at the township you see. If I am with the guys I will speak English. Then the people who will be standing next to me listening .. like everything becomes normal like we are speaking isiZulu. But the minute I start speaking English everybody begin to notice me you see .. they will look at my standard you see.
- S8:** I think that English is for the White people . . . Sometimes you will find that the lecturer will say a joke in English then the whole class will laugh and you will not laugh just because you did not hear anything. If it was for me I would study everything in isiZulu; maybe it would be so much better for me to understand because sometimes I do not understand. The problem is not with the subjects but it's the language.
- S5:** Ai to me.. English is not a big issue.. sometimes I get stuck. **If I am sleeping.. if I dream.. I do not dream in English.. in all of my dreams I speak isiZulu. ..I will never ever dream in English.**

(Laughter)

In contrast with Zulu, “mine and I own it” (excerpt 9), English is a language of which students don't feel ownership, and in which they will “never ever dream.” Student 11 views English as “not my language,” and, more strongly, labels it a foreign settlers' language. It is a language he is “forced” to speak, for educational reasons. The repetition of “I am forced” emphasises lack of choice. His pauses also give his utterance more emphasis. Student 4 notes that using English in the township context is marked, making “everybody begin to notice me.” For Student 8, English is “for the White people.” Like Student 11, he views English as “not ours,” a code in which he does not understand jokes. Making an uncharacteristic opposition to the language ideology current in South Africa, he suggests Zulu as the medium of instruction at university. Difficulties

⁴Ne: an Afrikaans tag question, which has been borrowed into Black South African English.

with his courses are ascribed to learning in English, not to the subjects themselves. By contrast, Student 6 (excerpt 9), significantly a Sotho speaker, and thus himself an outsider in the KwaZulu-Natal province, views English as “for everybody,” “a medium of instruction,” a lingua franca that he can use to communicate with Zulu speakers, tellingly referred to as “them.”

The “Coconuts”

In excerpt 10, Student 3 positions himself as African, and draws on the label “coconut,” used to pressure others to retain an African identity, one that excludes speaking English, particularly with native proficiency. Repeated laughter shows sympathy with the stigmatisation of fellow Africans who have had the educational advantages that participants have lacked. “Coconuts” refers, as Student 3’s final utterance implies, to those who attended a well-resourced, previously White school (known as model-C) mostly staffed by English-speaking, well-qualified teachers, with a multicultural student body (as described in De Kadt, 2005). As discussed by McKinney (2007), Black African students who attend such schools acquire native-like proficiency in English, increasing educational and job opportunities.

Excerpt 10 and the one from an essay that follows indicate that speaking English much out of class is not an option for our participants, as they want to avoid being viewed as coconuts, inauthentic Africans who are Black on the outside but White on the inside. This labelling is concerned with who may legitimately consider themselves African. It is not enough to be ethnically African; authentically African behaviour and use of an African language is key. Fear of loss of cultural identity (excerpts 1 and 2) may contribute to a desire to make others adhere to this definition of African identity.

As Vincent (2008) has noted, this stigmatisation of those who deviate from peer-defined norms is part of the policing of a continued lack of real integration between race groups, in which the group who has experienced integration to a greater degree than any other is criticised as being “too White.”

Interview excerpt 10:

S3: **At the same time like if you speak English .. here at the Varsity we even have this terminology for those people who love speaking English. We call them COCONUTS.**

(Laughter)

S3: **Even here at the res .. if you speak English like every time .. people start isolating themselves from you .. and they will start calling you a Model C.**

(Laughter)

The following excerpt from a student essay confirms this stigmatisation and suggests that to master the formal English necessary for writing at university, one has to “pretend as if English is their mother tongue,” a further image of inauthenticity:

To master the formal English students have to adopt and practice English and also pretend as if English is their mother tongue. In most cases you find students criticizing other students when speaking English saying that they lose their identity and influenced by the western culture. (Essay)

Thus it is clear that students have a complex relationship with English. It is a language they would like to be proficient in, in order to do well in their studies, but one they do not identify with. Instead, it is viewed as a “White” language.

CONCLUSION

The impetus for the study concerned the question of whether educational experiences and, specifically, constructions of student identity by the institution or by students themselves hinder or facilitate participation in a specifically academic identity. We found strong identification with Zulu culture and language and construal of prior educational experiences as disadvantaged but not resulting in an identity of inferiority for the participants themselves.

Participants’ strong sense of cultural identity as Zulus was expressed in feelings of continuity with parents and forefathers through Zulu culture and a rural home. “Culture” was represented as unchanging and passed down from the ancestors; it was realised as beliefs based on respect for and protection by forefathers, attitudes of respect for parents, and behaviours such as support for and commitment to the community back home.

Significantly, the Zulu language, and speaking it for all social purposes, and even dreaming in it, was key in this construction of a Zulu identity. English was viewed in instrumental terms as, at best, a useful lingua franca, more negatively as a language that interfered with education by making understanding more difficult, and even more negatively as the language of settlers. This attitude represents a finding that supports those of Kapp (2004), Rudwick (2004), and De Kadt and Mathonsi (2003), all studies of students from less-advantaged schools where students are more strongly oriented towards their mother tongue. Other previous studies such as McKinney (2007) and Bangeni and Kapp (2007) found closer identification with English; however, these studies concerned students who had attended more advantaged schools and who thus participated in the advantages of speaking a “White” variety of this economically powerful language.

Sadly, the “old” South African racial ideology of distinctly separate races with different appropriate behaviour and language use was evident. Policing of such racial separation was apparent in the stigmatisation of “coconuts,” viewed as inauthentic Africans who speak too much English rather than speaking Zulu.

Education, both secondary and tertiary, was represented as an expanding influence that would not conflict with the rural Zulu identity but would expand and enlarge it. An educated identity was positively but variously construed as continuous with the home identity by participants who felt they belonged to their parents and the community, and by others as allowing the freedom to explore an individual path outside of parental and community demands. The expanding influence of education was viewed as leading to a better life with a well-paid job in the city. Successful assumption of this identity as an educated person required the tool of academic literacy, the features of which students were well able to articulate. It appeared that students did not experience their Zulu cultural identity and their educated identity as being in conflict.

What was the influence of the institution in identity construction by participants? Participants seemed relatively comfortable with being viewed as coming from a disadvantaged school. This disadvantage did not, however, attach to participants themselves or become part of an identity projected by participants. Construed by the institution as disadvantaged, they reconstrued themselves not as disadvantaged but rather as “proud” and “lucky to be here.” They vigorously rejected

any implication that “disadvantaged” could be equated with ignorance or inferiority. Because of this rejection and reconstrual of negative assigned identities, these negative identities appeared to us not to be a hindrance to acquisition of the literacies that had been our concern at the start of our study.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

- .. Untimed short pause of half a second or less.
- ... Untimed longer pause of more than half a second.
- CAPITALS:** Speech is louder than surrounding discourse.
- Bold:** Originally Zulu, but translated into English.

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